

## Air raids and the 'Wee' Hospital

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Many members of the public are unaware that the Ulster Hospital existed before opening on its present site at Dundonald. Its history before then has been documented (Marshall 1959,<sup>1</sup> Logan 1987<sup>2</sup>) and the reasons for moving from the centre of Belfast in 1891 to Roundhill House, Templemore Avenue, in the east of the city. After a period in Roundhill House it was demolished and a new purpose built hospital was constructed which opened in 1912. (fig. 1) This was subsequently extended in 1937 just before the war. It was affectionately known locally as the "Wee Hospital".

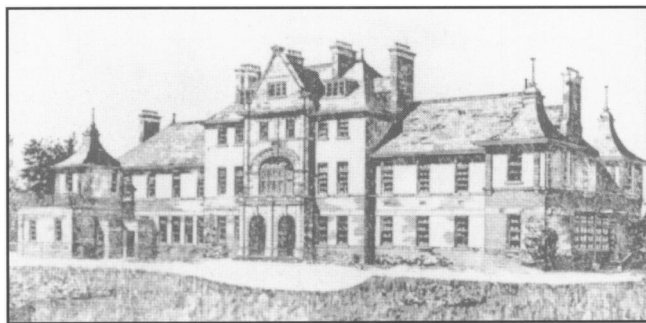


Fig 1. The Ulster Hospital for Children and Women, Templemore Avenue in 1912.

As far as is known there is only one account of the destruction of the hospital in 1941. The little booklet titled "Air Raids. A Belfast Hospital's Trinity" was published anonymously to raise money for the construction of a new hospital. However, the author was known to be Mr R J McConnell (fig. 2), a surgeon on the staff of the hospital. I am only aware of one copy of this document, which was given to me by a retired doctor who practised on the Beersbridge Road.

While relating in some detail the events of one night's bombing (April 15th-16th 1941) in a satirical and entertaining manner the book vividly describes what it was like to be in the centre of a target area of enemy bombing, and names many of the people present and how they behaved. As



Fig 2. Mr R J McConnell

the book is twenty-six pages in length only extracts can be recorded here. (printed in italics)

The evening started by Mr McConnell and four colleagues setting off from the University area by car which, near Shaftesbury Square, showed "*ominous protests from the engine [which] suggested trouble in the respiratory system, or possibly in the alimentary, just in fact, night starvation*". After some mechanical adjustments under the light of flares and tracer bullets they were able to proceed to the hospital where, apart from those too ill to move, the patients were in the air raid shelter. It is recorded that thirty to forty children, some dangerously ill, were there together with an unrecorded number of gynaecological

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patients. (It must be remembered that most of the children less acutely ill had already been moved to Saintfield House, the home of Reverend Canon Blackwood-Price). The fire-watchers were on the roof and among these were two medical students called Neely and Kennedy. They had been at the Royal Victoria Hospital where the former told me they could get free food if they were fire-watching, but as they were resident in the Ulster Hospital they thought they should return there. They boarded a tram, the driver of which ignored traffic lights, proceeding at "forty" through the centre of the city *"with Neely's persuasive presence on the driving platform and Kennedy helping the sturdy conductor to appease the other passengers, the tram finally landed them in Mountpottinger, somewhere near the Hospital"*.

Throughout the night the extern was manned as it had been classified as an "inner casualty receiving hospital, Class 1". Soon the casualties began to arrive. *"One, a boy of about eighteen had gone out to see the shooting and suddenly a crack on the back like the kick of a horse knocked him on his mouth and nose."* He had a piece of metal buried in the muscle of his back which later in the night on its removal was found to be a German machine gun bullet. Another patient had been blown off a roof and fractured his femur which was placed in a Thomas splint after treatment for shock. Shock was common in the casualties and was treated by *"a simple routine of heat rest, sedatives and fluids . . . and gave excellent results. Apart from this masterly inactivity the most difficult of all forms of treatment. and the most thankless is undoubtedly indicated in the vast majority of cases."*

A man and a woman were admitted with a series of parallel cuts of varying lengths and depths. Both were filthy with their clothes torn and covered in blood. These injuries could not be explained until at operation a piece of glass was found in the bottom of each wound. It is interesting that patients were operated upon during the course of the raid. This showed the tremendous courage of the staff, most of whom stayed at their posts for the whole night. Miss Isobel Dixon, the radiographer, refused to retire after a heavy piece of concrete fell on her and she was diagnosed as

having fractured ribs. It is also worth recording that many of the senior honorary staff turned up to help, leaving their homes in much safer areas of the city. While the doctors behaved bravely there were others who were prepared to exploit the raids, even in such dreadful circumstances, to make political gain from the situation as explained in the following extract. *"About this time the Mountpottinger area was being heavily bombed. We didn't like it, but it provided a glorious opportunity for those who knew all about German intentions. They told us how the raiders deliberately bombed hospitals and churches, but not Roman Catholic chapels. Hospitals with a hope of spreading epidemics: bacteriological laboratories, they said, were a special target. So authoritative were their statements that we almost felt the Aga Agar with its countless deadly billions pouring down on us. Roman Catholic chapels were spared lest Mr de Valera should be annoyed or the Roman Catholic vote in America antagonised. It was useless for us to point out that if the aim of the Luftwaffe even approached the accuracy alleged, there wouldn't be a ship-building yard in the country capable of producing a decent sized 'Robina',"*

Apart from time spent operating on and examining casualties Mr McConnell seems to have moved around the hospital. He describes at one point what this must have been like: *"On the stairs we heard the, now all too familiar, drone of Heinkels, and just as we reached the landing beside the big stained-glass window, we recognised, amid the general din of anti-aircraft guns, the initial swish of a released bomb . . . we took the remaining steps to the hall three at a time, and hurriedly crouched against the inner wall of the old telephone room. But long before we could assume a position of any comfort, the bomb struck with a thud and the crash which followed rattled, not only the Hospital, but our teeth. The explosion seemed to be quite near, indeed for a moment or two we thought it had got the extern."* It seems extraordinary that when he entered the women's ward *"a kind of singsong was in progress, and a response to the clarion call of 'now then girls, altogether' would surely have softened even the rigid auricles of John Knox"*. Sister King and her nurses certainly knew how to maintain the patients' morale.

But still the casualties arrived. One amusing if sad case deserves description in the author's own words: *"One of them, a stoutish lady in the*

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Mr M R Neely subsequently became a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist in the hospital and the present gynaecological ward is named Neely in his honour

*'roaring forties', was more concerned about a fur coat she had lost than about her injuries, though these were by no means trivial. Her home, along with most others in the street, had been completely wrecked, yet she begged, bullied and badgered us for permission to go back and look for her lost treasure. Lest we should be over-persuaded by this determined woman, we hurried her off to the ward. Our victory was short-lived. Half-an-hour later her bed was empty, and she had to be posted 'missing' believed treasure hunting! Shortly afterwards, she was hustled back to the Hospital by two extremely harassed looking wardens. They had, they told us, to descend almost to the level of the Gestapo to prevent her clearing the ropes which surrounded the area in which her home had once stood. Again she was comfortably bedded; again, and with all the wiliness of a fox, she silently disappeared. This time she was posted "'missing' believed untameable."*

*A few days later we heard that, with three friends, she had been admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital, all four of them suffering seriously from coal gas poisoning – she was the only survivor! Eventually she came back to the 'Ulster' to have her wounds dressed and to show us the root of her persistence, and our anxiety – the fur coat! This garment may have been mink, skunk or sable, we do not know; it may have been Bond Street or North Street, we are no judges, and she did not enlighten us, but when she displayed a secret pocket cunningly hidden underneath the lining and filled with a wad of notes, we readily understood its lure. How she eluded the vigilance of the police, the wardens and the soldiers in order to search the dangerous wreckage which had once been her home, we cannot tell, but our heartfelt sympathy goes out to the unfortunate guardians of public safety who, without doubt, performed deeds of the greatest valour in their unsuccessful efforts to repress her."*

The bombs continued to fall and the effects produced are recorded.

*"We were in the air raid shelter when a huge bomb – audible all the way – almost completely wrecked, as we were to learn later, Westbourne Street and Tower Street. The blast from the explosion forced open the particular door of the shelter which led into Glenmore Street. Instantly, and in tones of touching hospitality, we heard Sister Wilson calmly exclaim, 'Come right in Mr*

*Murphy, I thought I knew your knock.' To really appreciate the revival value of such a remark made at such a time, one must be able, not only to thole a split infinitive, but to have swithered in an air raid shelter swaying and rattling from its foundations, in which debris was flying about all over the place and a hurricane lamp performing extraordinary and alarming antics and from which the vivid splutterings of incendiaries on the cobbles of Glenmore Street, and the crackling roar of nearby flames could be seen and heard. Nor must we omit the preliminary five or six seconds of dread suspense already described. Few, we think, will deny the right of Sister Wilson's remark to permanent record in the annals of the Hospital."*

Later there was a more serious explosion when the hospital received a direct hit which destroyed the gynaecological theatre so recently completed. *"Shaking and shuddering, crunched and cracking the whole Hospital, in fearsome chunks, thundered down on top of us, or so it seemed to everybody in the anaesthetic room."* While neither staff nor patients were injured flames were seen to rise from the region of the boiler house which was reported to be in ruins. The flames were not from the boiler house but from an ignited burst gas main in the street outside.

*"... the boiler house was in ruins and in an atmosphere of escaping gas with its threatening odour Water pouring through the ceiling sizzled as it fell on the still glowing furnaces. Great twisted pipes and heavy slabs of masonry suspended in mid air by the flimsiest looking, we know not what, made a crazy frame-work through which we could see the burning gas, and beyond it right into the intimacies of the houses on the far side of Glenmore Street."*

Many casualties were expected from this street but only one came *"... an old man, more confused than hurt. He was under the stairs, he told us, with his wee dog, when the bomb 'went off'. After that he didn't know what happened until he was pulled out of his house and brought to the Hospital. "Right enough," said the old man, "they hauled me out of me house and pushed and pulled me to the Hospital, but" and he yammered it in endless reiteration, "they have went and lost me wee dog on me. He was sitting on a chair, bent forward and clutching his head between his hands, with an elbow on each knee. Suddenly, as we talked, he stiffened, gazed fixedly*

at his feet for a moment or two and wailed, "Och doctor dear, look at what yiz have done, look at what yiz have done, yiz have stitched me feet on the wrong legs, what wull a do, what wull a do?" This tragedy was easily fixed when his boots were removed and put on the right feet. The "wee dog" was also found by a student and the old man regained his equanimity.

Whilst there were no serious injuries amongst the hospital staff there was one very lucky escape. When the hospital was struck by the bomb "... Dr Brennan was resting on the bed in the small ward beside the Gynae theatre, fortunately he heard it coming, and shrewdly guessing its objective, was under the bed when it arrived, not more than ten yards from where he lay. Needless to say, the structural alterations caused by the explosion were noisy, sudden and extensive, and Dr Brennan quickly recovering his wits, and with the bed still on top of him, realised that he was sliding head first into Glenmore Street, about twenty feet below" where his shoes and stethoscope were found next day. Fortunately Dr Brennan is alive and well at the time of writing.

This however was not the final bomb of the night as it was soon realised that an incendiary had struck the roof. Attempts were made to control this with a stirrup pump as a temporary measure while awaiting professional assistance. The pump

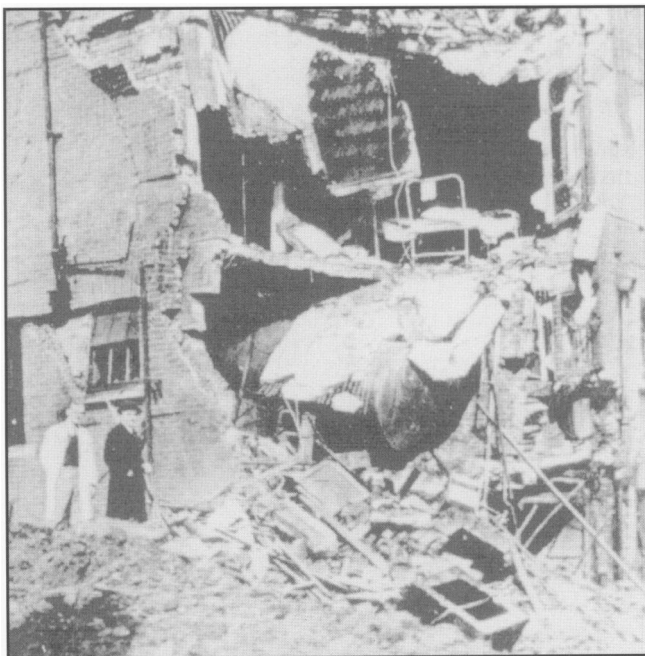


Fig 3. Dr G A Donaldson and Dr R Marshall survey the damage to the hospital. Dr Brennan's bed can be seen on the first floor.

was incapable of reaching the flames and the Matron, Miss Aicken, organised a chain of people to pass buckets of water from the baths which had been filled in anticipation of such an event. While this was going on an oil bomb struck the roof and the fire became uncontrollable and evacuation of the hospital became essential. (fig. 4)

The members of staff were then collected in groups and were taken in cars by some of the medical staff to safer areas, despite the appearance from the hospital of fires in all directions. The younger medicals remained around the hospital



Fig 4. The Hospital after the Blitz.

and while in great danger they tried to salvage as much of the valuable equipment as possible. The more senior members retreated to the Royal Victoria Hospital presumably to help deal with the casualties there.

Despite the flippant and humorous way in which this account was written the extreme bravery of all those present throughout the night cannot be underestimated. Today with films on television of bombings taking place in various parts of the world we can appreciate, from the safety of our armchairs, the danger of such action. What must it have been like for those brave members of the hospital staff to have been present on that fateful night?

The account given by McConnell in the little book records the events taking place on one night. However, Marshall (1959) chronicles some of the events as taking place on different nights. For the sake of historical accuracy an extract of his paper is included:

*"During the first raid on 7-8 April 1941, the Hospital was sprayed with incendiary bombs, quickly dealt with by gallant hands. The second attack was 15-16 April, when a large bomb was dropped immediately outside the wall of the new*

*wing, completely destroying it . . . The Hospital, thus mutilated, maintained its function as a casualty clearing station, and members of the honorary staff continued in turn to sleep in the draughty premises at night. On 4-5 May the Germans returned, and this time dropped an oil bomb on the roof, setting fire to the Hospital and virtually destroying it. Mr R J McConnell, Mr Ian McClure, Dr Hilton Stewart, and Miss Isabel Dixon, our radiographer, were on duty on that occasion . . . It was a source of great gratification to all of us that Mr McConnell, Miss Aicken and Miss Dixon received official commendation from His Majesty for their gallantry, and, as well as these, the Committee and Medical Staff very warmly commended Dr Hilton Stewart, Mr Ian McClure and indeed all those who had been on duty during this, the most dreadful of the air-raids."*

Another account of the blitz was sent to me in 1987 by a nurse then called McBryde who worked in the hospital from 1938 to 1941. (Trimble, M)<sup>3</sup> It is worth quoting in full. *"And then the blitz came. Every time the German planes came the hospital was hit so the children were evacuated to Saintfield and patients were kept to a minimum. The ward staff were on the alert on the night of the Big Fire. I had no patients in the hospital, the theatre and the maternity wards had been bombed on a previous night – I had no patients on the district – they had been evacuated to safer areas. I was asked to stay with half a dozen gynae patients in the basement shelter. During that long night only Mr McConnell and Mr McClure came to see us and later commented in their little book that no one envied Sister McBryde her job that night. When the mighty land mine fell near us one expected something to fall down but instead the ground gave a mighty heave and seemed to rise up. No lives were lost but a lot of the staff lost entire possessions, myself included and the dream of a lovely wardrobe of clothes hasn't even been realised."*

The hospital was obviously not in a state to continue in Templemore Avenue. A disused school at Haypark off the Ormeau Road was purchased and adapted for the gynaecological patients. The children were transferred to Saintfield House. Ultimately the "wee hospital" was partially rebuilt and used for seeing outpatients. Later it became a general practitioner maternity unit and then a health centre.

When a city was bombed heavily during the war it was customary for a member of the Royal Family to pay a visit. In May 1941 Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Gloucester paid a visit to Belfast and the Ulster. She asked if she could become a patron of the hospital and has maintained an interest in it since. She celebrated her one hundredth birthday at Christmas 2001.

The major outcome of the bombing was the realisation of the ambitions of the Medical Staff. Hitherto the hospital had been for children and women. It was hoped that after the war the hospital would also cater for men – they wanted a general hospital. The little booklet was written to raise funds and ultimately £100,000, a huge amount then, was handed over to the Northern Ireland Hospital Authority and the Ulster Hospital was built and reopened at Dundonald.

Perhaps it puts the plight of the Ulster Hospital into perspective to relate some of the statistics of the German blitz on Belfast. The first raid on 7th-8th April 1941 was small, only six bombers being involved. It was strategically important in that the four and a half acre Harland and Wolff fuselage factory was reduced to ashes and there was also damage to the docks. On the second night (15th-16th April) nearly two hundred bombers were involved. They dropped two hundred and three metric tonnes of blast bombs and eight hundred fire bomb canisters. More than seven hundred people died and over fifteen hundred were injured. There were sixteen hundred homes destroyed and twenty-eight thousand damaged. The raid on 4th-5th May killed one hundred and fifty people and injured a similar number. The raids severely damaged fifty-six thousand houses and damaged three thousand two hundred rendering fifteen thousand citizens homeless. It was said that ten thousand people slept in the fields and ditches for several weeks (Bardon, 1982).<sup>4</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### REFERENCES

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